THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Sweet Freedom's Song

July 4, 1999

John M. Buchanan

When you once have known what it is
To be loved freely,
Submission no longer
Has any taste.

All the prostrations in the world
Are not worth the beautiful upright
Attitude of a free man as he kneels.
All the submissions, all the dejections
Are not equal in value to the soaring-up point,

The beautiful straight soaring up of
One single invocation
From a love that is free.

"Freedom"
God Speaks
Charles Péquy

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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SWEET FREEDOM'S SONG

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
July 4, 1999

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Galatians 5:1, 13-15

"For freedom Christ has set us free." Galatians 5:1

We thank you, O God, for the blessings of liberty, for the simple but beautiful privilege of reading a newspaper this morning which has not been censored, for the privilege of deciding to invest this morning in worship, free from control or encouragement, for the freedom to believe in you or not to believe. Author of liberty, startle us with your love which frees us from everything that would oppress or demean or hold us back, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It is an interesting experience to be away from this country on the Fourth of July. Years ago, when living for the summer in Scotland, we were sitting in the dining car of an overnight train from London to the Western Highlands, four of us, still enthralled with the experience of sleeping on a train and sitting at a graciously appointed table waiting for breakfast, which I recall included kippers—smoked fish—and stewed tomatoes, a stimulating way to begin your day! When the waiter brought our food he proudly placed a tiny American flag on our table—it was the Fourth of July. Our British fellow travelers saw it and offered congratulations along with some delightful banter and before long the entire dining car was singing "God Save the Queen" and "Yankee Doodle Dandy."

And so, in the spirit of that trans-Atlantic gesture of good will, if you come back for Vespers, at which the Reverend Calum Iain MacLeod, citizen of Great Britain from whom we declared our independence 223 years ago today, is preaching, you can hear the other side of the story, or as Calum has gently threatened, "A Lament for Our Lost Colonies."

Actually, Calum's ancestors, Scots, British subjects who came to the colonies in the early and mid 18th century—Presbyterians—fought on both sides of the War for Independence. Some were enthusiastic defenders of the Crown. Others, many others, were here, at least in part, to get away from the Crown and the established Church of England. Many of them related their Calvinistic theology with its emphasis on individual liberty and responsibility to the struggle to create a new political entity on this continent. Political freedom was a holy cause. Presbyterian ministers recruited for the Continental army from their pulpits. One New Jersey minister persuaded the members of the congregation to tear pages from hymnals for musket wadding, saying, "Let's give em Watts, boys!", referring to

Isaac Watts, popular hymn writer of the day. One of them, John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister from Scotland, President of the College of New Jersey, later Princeton, was a delegate to the Continental Congress in 1776 and the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. Once it got going, the Scots Presbyterians (who by then were the largest single religious group in the new world) took up the cause of independence with such enthusiasm that a member of Parliament referred to the military skirmishes in the colonies as "that Presbyterian revolt."

Peter Gomes, in his recent book, reflects on how Americans celebrate the Fourth of July and observes the incongruity of the increasing popularity of the 1812 Overture, punctuated by fireworks—an experience refined to perfection on our own lake front—and wonders why "we should use a Russian celebration of an 1812 victory over the very French allies who helped us win our independence—unless it is that American like noise, no matter who produces it." (*Sermons*, p.110)

Gomes points out that the freedom that was won and then built into this republic in the late eighteenth century was neither a one-time event, nor a philosophic abstraction. Supreme Court Justice, the late Thurgood Marshall, offended a lot of people by pointing out the obvious: namely that the U.S. Constitution was a "flawed document at inception because it accepted the universal and unacceptable reality of slavery, thus postponing what it would take much blood and many years to address, if not resolve." (Gomes, p.110)

Freedom, Gomes says, is a process—"the constant renewal, reformation and extension of freedom carried out by many people over many years under many circumstances." (p.111)

In 1776, it was anything but an abstraction. I've always loved the way historian Bruce Catton put it. "They wanted no more of King George, of course, but they also wanted the kind of freedom that came into the front yard and parlors and kitchens of the ordinary human being. Men and women did not propose to be bossed around any longer, and at the same time they did not propose to go hungry or live in want or feel the restraints of a tightly ordered society where classes and customs were beyond change. They saw liberty not as a glorious abstraction, but as something that began with what the citizen had for breakfast and went on to affect all the homely concerns of every-day life." (*American Heritage*, 6/74, p.6)

It is a major biblical theme—human freedom is, and political freedom. In fact, some argue that freedom is what the Bible is about. It's there in our earliest stories. In the garden of Eden human beings are free in a way the rest of creation is not. Human beings are free to name the other creatures, free to make decisions, free to obey or disobey God, free to be responsible or irresponsible. Later, God hears the cries of people who are not free, the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Our earliest theology is liberation theology, about a God who raises up a liberator, a freedom fighter by the name of Moses, to lead oppressed people out of captivity to freedom and autonomy. God in the Bible is always agitating, enabling, empowering people to be free of everything that confines and restricts them from becoming all God created them to be. Truly, in the Bible, "wherever the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

The Bible is also extraordinarily candid about the fragility of freedom. As soon as the children of Israel are free of the yoke of Egyptian slavery they start to complain. They're free, to be sure, but they're in a wilderness and there's no food or water and they're lost and they're going to wander for forty years. And suddenly slavery doesn't look so bad. After all, there was food and water back in Egypt. It was slavery, but it was secure and predictable and in their radical freedom they begin to pine for their old oppressors.

Sometimes, in the midst of fear and uncertainty, people are astonishingly willing to give up their freedom. It is sobering to recall that Adolf Hitler was elected to office by a German population that was weary, anxious about the future, broke and frightened, and that Benito Mussolini did, in fact, make Italian trains run on time. It is sobering to recall the personal liberty, freedom of speech and assembly, freedom to associate with whomever one pleases, to believe or not believe whatever one chooses, which we were almost willing to sacrifice in the midst of the hysterical fear of communist conspiracy in the 1950's.

And it is sobering to realize how close to the surface the issue always is. The House of Representatives just did it again: acted to limit freedom of expression and to protect you and me from the threat of flag burning . . . declined, by the way, to do anything about the easy accessibility of semi-automatic weapons, hand-guns, or, for that matter, declined even to address the enormous and distorted system of campaign financing, both of which have a great deal to do with the pursuit and extension of freedom, but did act bravely to protect us from the flag burners. Will Campbell has written a delightful new book of essays, *Soul Among Lions*, in which he says:

> "There's something about our priorities. Once again we're hearing talk about amending the Constitution to make flag burning a crime. Since the Constitution was written, the average of reported flag burnings has been fewer than one per year. That doesn't strike me as being of epidemic proportions. Like, say, drive-by shootings of children or homeless families living on the streets. Why don't we tackle that constitutionally?" (p.5)

Political philosophers know that political liberty rests on a deeper foundation—a spiritual foundation, if you will.

St. Paul, who Peter Gomes says was a bigger revolutionary than George Washington or John Adams, wrote, "For freedom Christ has set you free. Stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." The time was the first century. The place was Galatia. Paul was writing to new Christians who were convinced that the way to follow Jesus Christ was to abide by all the provisions of the old law, the Jewish religious law: dietary restrictions, Sabbath regulation, sanitation and hygiene rules, circumcision for men. But in Jesus Christ, Paul had discovered, there was a whole new way of being faithful—a way of glorious freedom—freedom from the old rules and regulations and the rigid social system they had created, the barriers in society based on religion that judged and categorized some people as pure, acceptable, righteous, and others, those who did not live by the law, or who, by accident of birth, were not part of the chosen ones, as impure, unrighteous sinners.

Jesus Christ has set you free, Paul argued. Jesus summarized the whole law in one sentence—love God and your neighbor as yourself. You are free, in him, from the old way; the old religious laws, with its legalisms and moralisms, free to love and serve one another.

That's bracing stuff. It's a whole lot easier to have a religion that tells you what to do and what not to do in every circumstance than to be responsible for moral decision making yourself. It's a whole lot easier to have a religion that tells you that you are righteous on the basis of what you avoid doing than one that holds you accountable to love and serve the neighbor who needs you. It is a whole lot easier to embrace a faith which reduces life's most complex dilemmas to simple moralisms than to challenge individuals to the risky business of moral decision making in the name of the one who for freedom has set us free. It is much easier to know that abortion is always wrong, as a writer, a Roman Catholic Diocesan spokesperson, so eloquently expressed it on the editorial page of the *Tribune* last Thursday, than it is to deal responsibly and bravely with the realities which today surround the matter of conceiving, bearing, caring for and raising children.

George Gallup warned, after doing an opinion poll several years ago, that the most popular forms of religion in the future will be those that can reduce moral complexities to simple rules; to deny, that is to say, the God-given responsibilities of our freedom.

When theologians discuss salvation—what it is, what it feels like, the talk inevitably turns to freedom. "Free at last! Free at Last! Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last," Martin Luther King, Jr. intoned at the Washington Monument, quoting an old spiritual We knew that he was preaching gospel; that it was more than voting rights and equal opportunity; it was something like our God-given destiny, to live fully, freely, as God's beloved children, all of us, each of us.

Yale theologian Letty Russell tells about interviewing people in East Harlem about their religious views. One of the interview questions was "What do you think salvation means?" In one focus group, after several conversion stories, a single mother, unemployed, struggling simply to keep her head above water, blurted out, "It means that I'm more free" (*Becoming Human,* p.92).

That's it, finally. "For freedom Christ has made us free.

This is the good news . . .

Jesus has opened the doors of whatever prison is holding us and invites us to walk in the pure, bright light of freedom as children of God . . . secure, safe, free. Whatever is your prison, your oppressor . . .

Some live in a prison of guilt—Jesus offers you forgiveness,
If it is regret—Jesus offers you new possibility,
Grief—Jesus offers you comfort,
Depression—Jesus offers you acceptance, encouragement,

Racism, sexism, ageism—whatever "ism" has you in its clutches—Jesus reminds you that you are God's child, God's beloved and his, Jesus' own sister/brother.

Fear—and who among us is not, at the deepest level of our souls, afraid—of the unknown, of the future, of what will become of us? "Do not be afraid," Jesus says. "Fear not."

Jesus promises that nothing will ever separate us from the love of the one who made us. We are, St. Paul reminded us, free, not only from oppression and fear and sin and death, but also free to love and serve—to become servants.

That's what ties it all together. Politically, we are free from oppression, free to build this nation, to live as neighbors, to work for the general welfare. Spiritually we become the men and women God created us to be when we learn to love and serve.

We are most free when we are in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is the idea behind a marvelous poem by Charles Péquy in a little volume, *God Speaks.* God is speaking about freedom. God says. . .

When you once have known what it is
To be loved freely,
Submission no longer
Has any taste.

All the prostrations in the world
Are not worth the beautiful upright
Attitude of a free man as he kneels.
All the submissions, all the dejections
Are not equal in value to the soaring-up point,

The beautiful straight soaring up of
One single invocation
From a love that is free.

Sweet freedom's song. Amen.